“Music Aboard the Charles W. Morgan and other 19th-Century Whaling Ships, Then and Now.”


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Abstract

The Charles W. Morgan plied the waters of the Western Arctic in the early 1860s as just one amid scores of whale ships that entered the region each season in pursuit of the bowhead whale and other marine wildlife (Sherman and Lund). Maintaining a presence through the early 20th century, these whalers embarked on 2700 voyages in the Western Arctic causing widespread effects on both sea-mammal populations and Native cultures (Bockstoce 1995: 14-15). The ships housed polyglot communities representing ethnicities from all around the world including European Americans, African Americans, Europeans, Africans, Pacific Islanders, Cape Verde Islanders, Asians, Native Americans and other northern indigenous peoples. Musical expression also reflected a multicultural milieu aboard these vessels, which served as traveling jukeboxes, featuring the latest and not-so-latest global sounds of their day. Mainly during the short summer months, local indigenous communities interacted extensively with the influx of commercial whalers. Hired out as hunters, seamstresses, translators, and navigators, Native peoples gradually integrated themselves into the new commercial enterprise. As overwintering voyages increased, foreign and local populations engaged each other more earnestly participating in formal, informal, and impromptu gatherings featuring various types of music such as Native drum dance and song, Western folk, popular, church, and classical. As whalers began to shift their focus to trading, music in the form of recorded songs, instruments, and machines began to
present itself as an important trade item. The acquisition of gramophones for some Native individuals expressed rising social status and an accrualment of wealth. For others, the new technology provoked curiosity and provided entertainment. Given the close connections between dance and music among indigenous cultures of the Western Arctic, foreign dance musical styles such as jigging, and square and country dancing flourished there. Genuine appreciation for this imported dance music and the important social bonds that it created between and among locals and foreigners helped sustain such musical practices. 19th- and early 20th-century commercial whaling activities created an atmosphere of cross-cultural exchange that allowed imported but Native-shaped musical and dance traditions to develop in the Western Arctic, traditions that have continued to the present day.

**Introduction of Commercial Whaling in the Western Arctic**

Commercial whaling was established in the Western Arctic waters of the Bering, Chukchi, and Beaufort Seas in the 1840s, over a decade before the arrival of the *Charles W. Morgan* in the region.¹ As early as 1843, whaling ships were hunting right whales off the coast of Kamchatka and in the Gulf of Alaska. Following the highly successful 1848 voyage of the *Superior* and its discovery of a large bowhead population, the Arctic Ocean became the next popular hunting ground for the commercial industry (Bockstoce 1995: 21-26).

Dozens of whale ships on average passed through the Bering Strait each season (Bockstoce 1995: 102). By at least the 1860s, American whale ships began to skirt the northwestern coast of Alaska (Maguire 169 fn4). For a few months in the summers they interacted with the native populations usually by way of trade. Such meetings took place both on the ships and on shore (Murdoch 53).
Whaling crews generally consisted of about thirty-five men, fifteen of whom served as captain, mates, boatsteerers, and other specific positions; the remainder worked as ordinary seamen and lived in the forecastle (Bockstoce 1995: 39, 270). Whale ships housed multilingual communities representing cultures from all around the world including European Americans, African Americans, Europeans, Africans, Pacific Islanders, Cape Verde Islanders, Asians, Native Americans and other northern indigenous peoples. The register of the Charles W. Morgan’s lucrative 6th voyage (1859-1863) during which it had ventured briefly into the waters of the Western Arctic (Leavitt 29-30 and Stackpole 81-82), demonstrates the diverse makeup of the crew, listing names such as Manuel da Rose Coello, Jose de la Costa, Ceracio de la Rosa, Henry Eldridge, Lewis Becker, Kaluha, Kealoha, Anton Ludwige, John McIntyre, Harry Mokii, and Friday Rotomar (Leavitt 89-90, 118). In addition to American ships, other nations such as Britain, France, Australia, Germany, and Norway operated multi-national whaling voyages in the Western Arctic. By 1855, however, the industry became almost entirely an American one (VanStone), though the crews remained largely multicultural.

Musical expression aboard the whale ships also reflected a multicultural milieu. For example, on the ship Eliza Adams of New Bedford bound for the Western Arctic, the journal keeper John Jones wrote the following entry on January 7, 1852:

… went forward to night [sic] to hear some music, found the fidler [sic] playing the fourth of July Evans keeping time with the bones, the blacksmith playing Juber on the banjo, Goss was playing Bonapart crossing the alps with the fife, and Kimble was whistling Yankee dodle do – the Portuguese was singing a song of their own, and some of the rest was singing old Dan Tucker is come to town, came aft as far as the stearage [sic] found the fiddle there and accordian in full blast, one singing when I read my little
dear, another O Miss Lucy Neal – then went into the cabin and found the old man rattlin away at The Symnoscope the rest trying very hard to go to sleep, then laid down on a chest thought of the girl I left behind me [fel] asleep and dreamt of thunder.

Whaling ships served as traveling jukeboxes, featuring the latest and not-so-latest global sounds of their day. Songs and instrumentals from North America, Europe, Africa, South America, Australia, Asia, and elsewhere passed from ship to ship, ship to shore, and vice versa. The various ethnicities and nationalities of the whaling crews suggest that motley forms of music were probably quite commonplace. The Australian whaler Japan’s stop at Russell, New Zealand in 1870 to fit itself out for a cruise to the Western Arctic provides a later example of profusely cosmopolitan musical interaction. There the ship’s crew engaged a number of American whalers for a lively evening of musical exchange (Wilkinson 70-71). The diverse musical styles effectively expressed the multicultural makeup of both the Australian (Wilkinson fn 31) and American crews. While whaling life conditioned an acute awareness of the world’s varying ethnic groups, such positive episodes of musical interaction, as experienced by the crew of the Japan and others, created a potential for different peoples to venture outside their cultural and linguistic boundaries and form harmonious relationships with one another.

Unfortunately, most whaling ship logs contain little if any description about musical life on a whaler. Those ship logs and journals pertaining to the mid-19th century Okhotsk and Western Arctic voyages of the Charles W. Morgan yield nothing of substance. However, the popular published account of Nelson Cole Haley’s experience as a harpooner on the ship’s third voyage (1849-1853), which sailed around the South Pacific whaling ground, contains some revealing musical references. For example, songs accompanying work at the windlass are detailed. Among the “soul-stirring, heart-rendering” chanteys³ mentioned by Haley are “High,
Randy, Dandy,” “Oh Off She Goes, Off She Must Go,” “Jigger in the Bum Boat,” “Sally in Our Alley,” and “Mobile Bay” (107 and 287). Used to raise the anchor, the windlass required many hours of repetitive up-and-down pumping. Chantey singing allowed the sailors to cope with this often monotonous and strenuous work and conduct it more efficiently.

Even during the busy northern whaling season from June to September, one can reasonably assume that musical performance played an essential role not only in accompanying mundane tasks but also in providing entertainment, inspiration, and camaraderie. Regarding the former, sailors often broke out in song when they processed a caught whale. Near Icy Cape, Alaska during the latter season of 1870, the crew of the Japan “manned the windlass, and merrily singing, they kept it in motion, until the blubber of both whales was safely hoisted on board, and stowed in the blubber-room” (Wilkinson 110). While operating in the waters of the Bering Strait in 1890, the crew of the whaler Alexander sang chanteys as they cut into a whale. On this occasion, the second mate, a Cape Verde Islander named Gabriel, led his crew at the windlass in well-known work songs such as “Whiskey for the Johnnies” (“Whisky Johnny”), “Blow the Man Down,” “Rolling Rio” (“Rio Grande”), and “Blow, Boys, Blow” (Burns 206).

The worth of individuals aboard whaling ships was not necessarily based on their ability to sing well but rather to sing loudly and spontaneously. For instance, Haley writes about one crewman who inspired his men with songs and words while rowing towards a whale (249). At other times, chantey singing was so boisterous, “it raised such a din that a gun going off aloft would hardly have been heard” (219). In order to while away the grueling and monotonous work hours, extemporization on chanteys and popular songs of the day often occurred aboard the whalers. William M. Barnes, who captained the Sea Breeze in the Western Arctic during the 1870s and 1880s (Brown 21, 74, 318), wrote the following details about singing aboard whalers:
Experience has shown that the men work more cheerfully at the windlass when their quite tiresome and monotonous labor is enlivened with a good song, and masters of whalers congratulate themselves if they find among their crew one who can lead off at the windlass with a rousing song. The men forget their fatigue; they quit grumbling, and with merry laughter join in a rattling chorus, while creaking falls and clanking pawls, and the frequent shout of ‘Board Oh!’ tell them that the work is fast being accomplished. It will be a happy change when the tireless, uncomplaining power of steam is used in the ‘cutting in’. The work will be done more quickly, and the men will be available for other uses. I wish I could give you a few of the songs the ‘shanty men’ sing, but as a great part of the singing is extempore, and only suited to the occasion, one does not remember it unless himself a singer. Many popular tunes are brought into requisition, being often changed by the singers. The words seldom amount to much, unless the singer chances to be witty, when he may make happy allusions to passing events. The tunes are exhilarating and selected on this account. Among the songs, I may mention here, ‘John Brown’s Body’, ‘Dixie’, ‘Marching Through Georgia’, ‘Old Dan Tucker’, with many variations, to which could be added many others. I think an Arctic whaleman would prefer a lively chorus at his windlass to the operas of the best masters (Brown 283).

As described above, the improvisational approach to singing aboard whalers and the use of pieces, in this case, minstrel and Civil War selections from the American songbook, reveal a flexible, spontaneous approach to music-making as well as an awareness and transmission of musical forms in a globalized setting.

The importance of music as an accompaniment to work-related activity is also evident in the above description. Interestingly enough, Barnes’ comment about replacing human muscle
with steam actually contributed to the eventual demise of chantey singing on board ships. The prevalence of steam power on commercial vessels by the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries removed the need of certain types of labor and their musical accompaniment. Furthermore, the increased loudness from steam engines and the shoveling of coal as well as the use of recorded music decreased the value placed on live singing.

During the active working months, whaling crews also made music simply for entertainment. Aboard the Charles W. Morgan, Haley noted the presence of whalers singing and dancing while his ship was gamming with another in the South Pacific (112). The journal of sixteen-year-old Nathaniel Saxton Morgan on board the Hannibal of New London includes one revealing account of whaling life in the Western Arctic. Heading into the polar waters in June of 1850, he remarked very positively about his first encounter with the region’s indigenous people: “at 2:30 pm, three large canoes came off loaded with Natives in their fur and skin dresses for trade. They were the most healthy and robust looking race of people that I ever saw – very stout built and of a light copper color” (Hannibal: June 16, 1850). Almost six weeks later, he recorded on July 29 the following musical description:

Light airs. Saw whale in the morning and the 2 mate lowered. No chance. Cooled down tryworks. Several canoes came off during the day. Afternoon spoke ship Superior 2600 whale, and ship Cincinnati, and had a fine “gam” with both. Borrowed the Capt’s fiddle and Goldsmith played and all hands had a dance on deck.

Firstly, the above quote underscores the fact that musical performance occurred on board the ships during the whaling season. Secondly, natives likely observed such events on a regular basis not only on board the vessels but also on land whenever the whalers came to shore.
Naturally, trade between whalers and Western Arctic natives provided the primary incentive for contact. Each season, as early as June, whaling ships stopped at villages along southeastern Chukchi Peninsula and headed northeastward towards the Alaska’s Seward Peninsula and beyond. Along the way, whalers quite often hired out native hunters and seamstresses, together with their families, to provide meat and fur clothing for the crew (Bockstoce 1995: 270-271). Cross-cultural trade generally consisted of the exchange of tobacco, guns, and alcohol for furs, whalebone, and ivory.

Eventually, musical instruments would also serve as popular trade items. Haley described Jew’s harps among the items whalers traded with the native populations of the South Pacific (91). Such instruments appeared so popular, especially among female Pacific Islanders, that some missionaries allegedly forbid their use (167). Musical trade in the Western Arctic occurred later. By the early 20th century, former whalers who had turned to trading full-time such as Hartson H. Bodfish and Christian T. Pedersen bartered violins, accordions, harmonicas, and gramophones with the indigenous peoples of Alaska, Chukotka, and northern Canada (Krejci 109-113).

Native exposure to Western music during the whaling season was probably common. Furthermore, since native children were frequently traveling alongside the whalers with or without their families, such music was absorbed at an early age. For example, while visiting the coast of Siberia in 1881, the American medical doctor aboard the U.S. Revenue Cutter Corwin, Irving Rosse, wrote about hearing “an Eskimo boy sing correctly a song he had learned while on board a whaling vessel” (37). Rosse’s observation that the boy sang the foreign song “correctly” suggests not only close cross-cultural interaction with whalers but also an ability on the part of the child to absorb a foreign musical expression quickly and thoroughly. Native children also
participated in dance exchanges with sailors aboard vessels. Although not a whaler, the following photograph depicts a dancing scene on the U.S. Revenue Cutter *Thetis* sometime during the early years of the 20th century.

![Image of dancing scene](image)

**Figure 1:** “Native boys of King Island, Dancing, Behring Sea,”

Group of sailors, native children and women on board the *Thetis* [circa 1899-1916].

According to the title, several King Island boys are dancing in the foreground of the photograph. Despite the obvious movements of the children and the sailor, it is difficult to say with any certainty whether the people are engaging in indigenous or southern forms of dance. Unfortunately, no instruments appear in the image. The older youth on the left, however, appears to be keeping the beat by slapping his thigh.

**Overwintering Whaling Voyages**

Overwintering whaling voyages in the Western Arctic began in relatively small numbers and prior to 1859 were unintentional. In 1852, the whaler *Citizen* out of New Bedford
shipwrecked off the northeastern coast of the Chukchi Peninsula over 200 miles north from East Cape. Surviving under the care of the native population during the winter, the sailors passed part of the time singing to their hosts. The following quote illustrates the sailors’ perception of the native people’s impression:

Some of us would sing to the natives, which tended not only to divert and encourage our own minds, but to please them. We found, however, they were wonderfully pleased with our singing, and so much interested were they in it, that nothing would satisfy them unless some one of us was singing to them. Thus they laid an oppressive task upon us, which we were not able to perform. What we commenced, therefore, as a sort of pastime, in order to while away tedious hours, days, and months, finally became, through the constant importunity of the natives, a grievous burden to us. (Holmes 114)

The above reference illustrates how music was an important means not only to pass the time but also, and more importantly, to communicate with a people who did not share a common language. Native interest in the whalers’ singing, though, may not have been limited to a simple appreciation of the sounds. It may have also signaled an attempt by the local people to learn the foreigners’ language, a skill that would have improved their chances of procuring trade goods and establishing future trade connections. As the end of the passage demonstrates, singing eventually became too taxing on the whalers since it encouraged socializing during times when they may have sought privacy. In this case, music had become too successful a tool of communication.

During the 1860s and 1870s, a handful of whaling crews spent the winter in the Western Arctic primarily along the southeastern Siberian coastline (Bockstoce 1977: 112-113). Some intentionally wintered over at suitable sites like Saint Lawrence Bay and Plover Bay, while
others ended up shipwrecked. Just as it was completing its 1870 season, the Japan, for instance, ran aground near East Cape. With the assistance of the native inhabitants, most of the sailors survived the long winter. The youngest of the crew, David Wilkinson, published a detailed account of the experience in his book Whaling in Many Seas and Cast Adrift in Siberia (1906). Wilkinson wrote much about musical interaction during his nine months living among the native people. Despite the blatantly ethnocentric nature of his writings, he presented some important musical observations.

Wilkinson frequently commented on native singing and drumming in the context of purification ceremonies, initiation rites, shaman rituals, and feasts (142-143, 158-160, 161-162, 164-165, 172, 194, 207-208, 216, 243, 255-256, 282, 296). Many of his observations refer to the presence of a shaman or conjuror, the use of a solitary drum, and a whalebone beater. He characterized the style of singing and drumming as a slow buildup in tempo and dynamics, culminating in a highly charged emotional state consisting of unusual facial and body contortions. Wilkinson also noted that performances were lengthy and often involved the consumption of alcohol. Both individual and group singing occurred but drumming was exclusively soloistic. In time, Wilkinson grew very critical of the “wily conjuror” and “horrid” drum due to his distrust of the shaman’s motives and the loud drumming and singing style, which often interfered with the sailors’ desire for rest. Writing over three decades later about his Arctic experience, Wilkinson continued to correlate native ceremonies with superstition and sorcery. In the conclusion of his book, he argued that only the teachings of Christianity would save the indigenous people of the Chukchi Peninsula from what he perceived as a state of spiritual darkness. On the Charles W. Morgan’s third voyage, the whaler Haley described in
similarly ethnocentric language the music of Pacific Islanders. He denigrated the quality of singing, negatively assessing the music in general as “horrible” and “screeching” (158-161).

Wilkinson wrote about native exposure to Western music, which he framed as a promising sign of appreciation for a civilized culture. On one particular occasion, he commented on how the locals “assembled together expressly to listen to the seamen singing their sweet songs and melodies” (211):

If we may judge them by the interest which they appear to take in our singing, then we must come to the conclusion that they are very fond of vocal music. It happened that at one of their social gatherings, eight or nine of the seamen together just to have a friendly chat, and amongst our number were a few of those rare individuals, who at all times, sing with acceptability. The Esquimaux round about East Cape, had never before heard so many voices singing together in harmony, the songs of some distant country. The singers sang many a well known English melody, that had been committed to memory during their happy boyhood days. Little did the sailors think that the songs and melodies they had learned when boys would be useful in after years, not as a pastime merely, but as the sole means – during the dark days of our Arctic life – of entertaining a heathen people, who were thoroughly delighted, yea, almost beside themselves with what they heard. Besides satisfying the native mind, the frequent performances whenever entered upon, always secured for each of the singers a rare luxury, in the shape of a small piece of plugged tobacco, which was considered a blessing by the castaways … Nothing seemed to please the Esquimaux better than when the sailors joined together and sang the choruses as with one voice. The natives were thoroughly enraptured with what they heard, and frequently applauded our singing in rather an extravagant manner. One native
was so charmed, that during the evening, he twice presented each singer with a good sized piece of plug tobacco. When the concert ended we filled our pipes – [our?] own made ones with the comforting weed and indulged in a grand smoke. (210-212)

The exchange of tobacco for song raises the question of whether the East Cape natives viewed the performance of foreign music as a gift for which a counter gift was appropriate or as a desirable trade commodity. The local population had already experienced for at least a few decades direct contact with an array of peoples including Russians, Americans, British, and others. Despite Wilkinson’s emphasis on the “uncivilized” ways of his hosts, he noted that they had guns, ammunition, gunpowder, needles, tobacco, knives, axes, needles, and alcohol. He also observed that the native people not only traded with whale ships and small trading vessels during the summer season, but also bartered in the wintertime with American traders situated along the Asian coast of Bering Strait (187). Therefore, the native population’s exposure to the outside was almost year round. It is important to note, however, that in spite of the East Cape population’s steady access to foreign goods and familiarity with Western music, Wilkinson did not mention the presence of any foreign musical instruments among them.

While instruments may not have always been present in such cross-cultural interaction, singing was notably more prevalent. Native fascination with foreign singing as observed by the shipwrecked crews of the Citizen and Japan, for instance, is a common theme in the ethnographic literature of the Western Arctic. Although appreciation of the music for its own sake appeared to be genuine, practical reasons may also account for its strong appeal. Musical interaction provided an opportunity for locals and outsiders lacking a common language, to communicate with one another and establish cultural bonds that enhanced their trading connections and social standing. Vocal music also helped one gain familiarity with another’s
language, which in turn opened up new avenues. Wilkinson’s host, a man named Tarrugee, eagerly demonstrated a desire to learn English, which he accomplished with great success (Wilkinson 203-205). The sailor surmised that his pupil’s increasing comprehension of the English language “would be of great service to him, that is, if he intended to associate with the American whalemen, who visit the Arctic seas annually” (205). Moreover, a command of the English language improved Tarrugee’s standing in the community as a sought-after interpreter (217-218). New opportunities such as these, however, gradually altered indigenous ways of life. In the larger scheme of things, as contact between natives and whalers intensified, native desire and dependency on trading goods and the need for further employment outside of traditional subsistence activities generated a feedback loop that resulted in greater cultural instability and uncertainty.

Sustained musical contact between whalers and the indigenous peoples of the Western Arctic continued well into the second half of the 19th century. Between the years 1881 to 1883, the naturalist John Murdoch, serving under the command of the U.S. Army Signal Corps at Point Barrow, carried out scientific investigations as part of the International Polar Year, a coordinated series of international polar expeditions designed to investigate the natural and cultural polar landscapes. Murdoch’s two-year study represents the first systematic attempt to document an anthropological understanding of the United States’ northernmost indigenous peoples. He concentrated mainly on aspects of Iñupiaq material culture, but he also presented a valuable description of their social customs, such as festivals and dancing. More limited in scope, the ethnographer also touched on certain aspects of cultural contact in his monograph, as evidenced by his various references to Iñupiaq usage of European American and Oceanic words and music, much of which the early commercial whalers and traders introduced (51-55, 388-389).
Murdoch observed that the Iñupiaq people picked up a few songs from the whalers and at least one from an 1852-1854 British naval ship that had participated in the search for the ill-fated Franklin Expedition. He wrote:

They are fond of civilized music, and, having usually very quick and rather acute ears, readily catch the tunes, which they sing with curiously mutilated words. We found “Shoo Fly” and “Little Brown Jug” great favorites at the time of our arrival, and one old woman from Nuwūk, told us with great glee, how Magwa (Maguire) used to sing “Tolderolderol.” Our two violins, the doctor’s and the cook’s, were a constant source of delight to them. (389)

Patronizing in tone, this quote, nevertheless, shows that foreign music appealed greatly to the Iñupiat of northern Alaska and just as importantly, contact between outsiders and locals was extensive and continuous. “Little Brown Jug” and “Shoo Fly” were standard songs in the blackface minstrel repertoire and popular amongst whalers. The origin of “Tolderolderol,” however, is difficult to trace since there are many American and British songs, both folk and popular, that use the refrain “fol de rol” or “tol de rol” (see Carr). After a period of almost thirty years, the elderly woman still remembered the song. Visiting whalers likely continued to sing it in her presence. Due to the influence of the whalers, Murdoch notes that the Iñupiat learned the words to “Little Brown Jug” and “Shoo Fly,” but in a somewhat distorted form.

The many descriptions above have made clear that southern music was performed on board whaling ships and other vessels during both the summer and winter months and that indigenous peoples participated in such occasions. While earlier explorers introduced native populations to various types of music from the outside, it was the whalers and later traders who precipitated a more constant musical influence. Whaling crews were culturally and ethnically
diverse and their music reflected that diversity. Newly penned popular songs and traditional
tunes from the United States, England, the Pacific, Cape Verde Islands, and others places were
introduced into the Western Arctic on an annual basis. As the foreign presence continued,
imported music became more acceptable especially among the younger locals. The gradual
increase of native knowledge in Western ways, thanks in part to musical exchange, helped the
indigenous people to build stronger trade relations.

**Music Aboard Sailing Vessels Today**

Today the role of music on sailing ships has greatly diminished. As mentioned above,
the advent of engine-driven vessels decreased the need for work songs that had originally served
as musical accompaniment for coordinated types of labor aboard whalers. The loud noise
associated with the new technology also diminished one’s ability to hear and appreciate live
music. My experience aboard the *Charles W. Morgan* as a 38th Voyager provided me a unique
opportunity to imagine the nature of music-making on whaling ships prior to the use of steam
and other more modern sources of energy. It also afforded me a new perspective into the
changing role of music aboard sailing ships in contemporary times.

As part of my project, I interacted with the crew musically and asked their thoughts on
whaling music. I collected data in the form of written/typed notes, photographs, and audio and
video recordings. In order to recreate a 19th-century musical setting, I also sang and played
historically relevant accordion tunes on board the ship. To reemphasize the idea that music
could be construed as a major distraction on sailing vessels, I was given only a small window of
time to sing whaling songs and play my accordion. The captain, mates, and crew, who worked
professionally throughout the entire leg of the journey from New London, Connecticut to
Newport, Rhode Island, were wary of allowing too much commotion to occur on the ship. Crewmembers had to be continuously vigilant of the wind and water conditions as well as of marine traffic, much of it observing the Charles W. Morgan’s historic return to the sea. They also were responsible for the safety of the dozens of guests aboard the vessel. Consequently, I played and sang only a couple of chanteys, notably “Rolling Down to Old Maui” and “John Kanaka,” with fellow voyagers. Some of our music was recorded by a crew of the New London-based newspaper The Day (http://www.theday.com/article/20140617/MEDIA0101/140619700/-1/MEDIA01). Also, a short video clip was recorded on my iPhone (see Video 1).

For this paper I interviewed three individuals while traveling on the first leg of the 38th Voyage from New London to Newport: deckhands Tim Reilly and Aaron Gralnick and fellow 38th Voyager Matthew Ecklund. I primarily questioned them about past and present roles of music aboard sailing vessels, how those roles have changed over time, ways to revive whaling songs, types of musical instruments linked to whaling, and the music of indigenous peoples from maritime settings. A summary of insights gleaned from the interviews follows detailed transcriptions of the interviews.

The first respondent, Tim Reilly, is a sailing deckhand and a professional ship rigger at the Mystic Seaport. He has decades of experience on sailing vessels and possesses a keen interest in chantey singing and scrimshaw. The second respondent, Aaron Gralnik, is also a sailing deckhand. He has about ten years of experience sailing tall ships and was a recent graduate from Maine Maritime Academy. Matthew Ecklund is a fellow 38th Voyager whose project involves the creation of a series of quill and ink illustrations of whales for use in future exhibitions and educational programs. To pass the time and share his music, he brought along a Tahitian ukulele also known as an ‘ukarere or Tahitian banjo.
Transcriptions

Bold-faced statements are interview questions I asked the responders. Their responses follow.

*Interview with Tim Reilly on June 15, 2014 aboard the Charles W. Morgan (see Video 2).*

**What is the role of music aboard these vessels?**

With traditional sailing vessels like this, merchant, seaman, uh, whale ships, uh, to aid in a lot of the heavy lifting jobs, they were using music but it was primarily as a rhythmic tool to keep everybody on the line and pull it together. It wasn’t finished music persay; it was wild shouting. “For a long pull and a strong pull in the yard to the masthead” like Masefield\(^{10}\) writes about…

“the salt-Atlantic chantey shall be music to the dead.” They were a whole body and they were subdivided into different jobs, different categories for different work depending on where you were on the ship and the gear that you were using. So start at the bow, we have windlasses… so you have a windlass chantey to aid the guys who are hauling the blankets of blubber aboard.

Those are longs jobs, tons of weight in the water and keeping everyone’s coordination going [???]

[An example of a windlass chantey is demonstrated in the following youtube video.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-KOourhm7TPQ]
Right here, next to the topsail, you have the topsail chanteys. “Blow the Man Down” is a famous one. “Whiskey Johnny” is another favorite that I’ve seen in a lot of first-hand narratives. Stuff like that. “John Kanaka” that you hear about. Those chanteys have a verse-chorus format so that you get a little bit of a rest as you change your hand position. Everybody lays back on the line. When you get near the top, you might change it to a single pull. “Bonny was a Lawyer” is a really good one. There’s a great one that was brought out from the West Indies called “Dan Dan.” “Paddy Doyle” is another one when you’re stowing sails. To get everybody to charge up on the bunk together. The cry up there now on the ship is “We bust ‘er.” “Even Bust ‘Em” is another one I’ve heard. At the end of chanteys that were sung by guys that were at Sailors’ Snug Harbor, a recording I have. They’re singing away, they’re singing away, they’re singing away
and they stop and you hear this scream with all the guys saying “Heave that Buster”. That’s what we were doing on the mainsail, on the main tops.

**What purpose do chanteys serve today?**

They are largely entertainment but they are also little historical capsules in a way where you can make living history of the sort with the people that learned these from the last of the people in the days of sail. Like Stan Hugill, Louis Killen was a huge repository of this song type, from Newcastle, England. There were other fellows that Stan learned from who were… like Harding was from Barbados. He had a whole bunch of sea songs, chanteys that he used. So it was folk singers and scholars realizing that this art form was going to be lost as early as the 1930s as WPA projects going into Sailors’ Snug Harbor recording. And they found sometimes that songs that were largely thought to be lost were in the brain of one guy and then it was recorded on [tape?] with the researchers. So it was passed down as an oral tradition and then it was written and in some cases some of the writing and some of the stuff that was sung actually by the sailors themselves on a recording device don’t match. So in some cases we have the field recordings from the Library of Congress; we have field recordings from the fellas at Snug Harbor. One of the neat recordings that I learned a lot of music from was on the *Brig Unicorn* in 1979, 1980 when they were doing this stuff underway. One of the fellas that worked there worked at Mystic Seaport for a while. My ex-wife worked on the boat at the same time. She was 15 years old at the time; she was the cook. So uh. She got me interested in square sailing back in 1990 and I sang ‘em at the museum … [???]
Could some of these chanteys still serve a practical purpose today?

Yeah, just to aid the work a little bit. There’s also a real, real cause for attention…when you’re handling this, you’re listening to your mates’ commands and everything else is subservient to that. I tried this on the coast of Maine. And we did sing chanteys sometimes underway on the coast of Maine but we always tuned in to the captain’s and the mates’ voice. The minute you heard it, all the singing stopped cause you needed to hear the commands. We held up an anchor and we had confusion one night and almost ran a 90-foot schooner onto the rocks in the dark because it got a little out of hand with all the music. You have to maintain the discipline here on the babble. It’s really hard for the people at the wheel if they’re communicating up and down.

[After suddenly receiving a command, Tim had to immediately end the interview and leave for another part of the ship.]

Interview with Aaron Gralnik on June 15, 2014 aboard the Charles W. Morgan (see Video 3).

So tell me about the role of music aboard these vessels, modern-day and traditional.

Traditionally they would have been used for every single task available. Being out to sea for 3 to 5 years, I can imagine they needed every single morale boost they could get. It helps keep everything in synch, together, which today is just as important, having fun. They also had other songs in the fo’c’sle for more enjoyment and then telling stories and such. It was a huge part of their culture back then. Today there’s still a large chantey culture but I believe it’s almost separated from the operations side of tall ships. Unfortunately, I being involved in both aspects of it, my experience is that either it’s just not a part of it as in no one really knows true chantey culture or it’s posed of as in people think they know it as “Drunken Sailor” and a lot of the more
commercially popular [hand quotes] chanteys. But I think hearing one song badly sung enough, people are just, that’s it, no more chanteys at all, which is very unfortunate.

**How would you counter that, improve the situation?**

I think a valid answer to most problems is education. Show people, show the sailors that songs are more than just your average “Drunken Sailor.” Make it entertaining and interesting. And then also show the other side. Show [the] chanteys that [these] are not just for fun entertainment and enjoyment. That these need to serve a purpose of keeping time and being able to work with us on the operations side because we still have orders and commands that we need to listen to and work for. And I think on both sides coming, bridging the gap, together, I think is possible. I’d like to see [that] happen but I think it would definitely take a lot of work on both sides – people coming together - the operations side learning some of the more traditional songs, learning how to haul to it and then teaching the singing side that look you have to be loud, you have to be clear, and keep a beat and but also not just your own beat but the sailor’s beat. They are the ones hauling on the line. They instinctively usually form their own rhythm and that has to match, be matched with the song. And then also a lot of the times, it changes due to the strength of the load coming up onto it so it slows down eventually which maybe with song could be more evened out throughout it but it’s still going to be slower towards the end as well as the singers a lot of times get into the songs but have to really know, they themselves need to know the commands of when to start and when to stop is really an important thing cause I mean these are big loads, big things you can really get hurt and hurt other things.
Any particular chanteys that you like to sing? What are your favorite chanteys?

Some of my favorite chanteys? Oh, I’m a huge fun of “Mingulay Boat Song.” Being on this boat, of course, “Last Leviathan” is one of my favorites. “Herds Against the Seal”. Definitely some good stuff.

Tell me about the “Last Leviathan.”

Well, to my knowledge I don’t know a lot about it but it was basically written in the 1980s when the whale, I hate to say it, hippie movement, but a lot of the more anti-whaling policy and other things were in, were kind of trending. A modern artist wrote a song to protest whaling saying “I am the last whale and I’m dying” and really gives heart and a voice to the whale. It’s a beautiful song and I mean it definitely, if done properly, it really is moving.

[When asked to sing some of it, Aaron declined as well as other songs]

Tell me about some chanteys you want to introduce, reintroduce to the crew.

I’ve just recently learned how there are actually different types of chanteys for different purposes and moods and such like modern music. There are a kind of fo’c’sle songs that are fun and I think would be fun cause I know a lot of our crew play instruments. It would be fun to have some of the instrumental people learn some of these songs so we can all sing along and play after work because we all love to really relax afterwards. But also, again, with not being able to use chanteys for everything nowadays, there are still a few things that I think are possible to use chanteys for. And I want to… such as, topsail halyards are really are our biggest and heaviest
hauling and they’re slow enough and long enough that they can really work with the song. We also have what’s called …

**Could you explain that? What is it that you have to do with the topsail?**

Yeah, basically our main driving sail called the topsail. Our upper, we have two – upper and lower topsail. The upper topsail, we drop a sail down and then actually haul up the yard, that large wooden spar that the sail’s attached to. And it has to go about 15 feet up the mast but because again, because of mechanical advantage, we have about a 8-part tackle system. So 15 feet times 8, there’s a whole lot of hauling that needs to happen. We usually have a minimum of 6 people on a line. So there really needs to be like with everything, large, real synchronization of everyone hauling together to get the max efficiency of all of our strength as one. And it is, it probably weighs, I don’t know, maybe a thousand pounds or so, altogether, everything, so it’s a lot of weight, a lot of people, and it’s long enough that we can get winded if we’re going too fast. If we’re not going fast enough, the mates yell at us. And so, really, it would be interesting to find, find a song that works for us with the right tempo, the right length. It’s also cool. I’ve learned that songs are actually written in the length of how long some of these jobs are needed for. So I also want to try and figure out just of my own modern … it’s kind of cool to see like this song is so long, for instance, “Hauling up the Anchor,” I know some very long songs. I’m curious to see over the length of a song, at the speed we go, just how far of an anchor you can pull up with it. To see like how many verses cause I, I would be shocked to say although it seems like it always works out that it just happens to be the perfect length to haul up maybe a shot or two, 90 feet each of chain, which is a very common length to use.
Any other particular chanteys to introduce to the crew?

I know “Old Maui” is probably a pretty time-specific, a good one, and that’s long enough and the beat kind of matches. I believe that would be a good one. Nothing else really off-hand, off the top of my head. But I know, I know on other boats, I’ve used for topsail halyard, I’ve used “Haul Away Joe.” It’s short, it’s a little bit quicker. And it’s, I’ve, on another boat, it actually, 4 verses is the exact time that you need to haul the sail, which I think is some of the coolest stuff. And then also the final jet task that I think could be used on this boat is for bunting up where when you’re furling…

[Sudden voice from a distance saying “Stand by, taking to the allots [???]” and sent by chain command to other crew members. Aaron immediately responds with “Stand by, taking to the allots [???] and races to his newly assigned position]

*Interview with Matthew Ecklund on June 15, 2014 aboard the Charles W. Morgan (see Video 4).*

[plays music on his instrument]

Can you explain where you got this instrument?

So, I was given, I sailed to Papeete, Tahiti, and they were selling ukuleles like this all over the place so I got it from a friend who purchased it in Tahiti when I was in New Zealand.
And the material?

I think that it is a combination of mahogany and then another kind of wood from French Polynesia but I’m not actually sure what this is made of. And I installed a little hook here so I can carry it around my neck. This is actually a door latch, I think. This is an old camera strap but it does the job. And then this is a little shell from Kiritimati, Christmas Island, 4 degrees north of the equator, which I went to on the way down to Tahiti. So it’s a, it’s a pretty unique looking instrument sort of like a mix between a ukulele, a banjo, and a mandolin. And like a ‘50s rock guitar. But it’s really, it’s got a great sound and supposed to make people happy.

Tell me about the music that you heard there on the island.

Well, they play it considerably faster than I can. Sort of like a, a combination of [plays]. And I can’t, I can’t match it for speed [but] I didn’t venture far off the boat but a friend of mine who went up hiking into the mountains of Tahiti said that he came upon these little sort of jungle shacks with about 4 or 5 guys in a circle all of them being, they were just playing and beating on ‘em, strumming really hard ukulele orchestras are common – u’kulele. There so… it’s tuned with fishing line so there’s no real difference in the diameter of the strings but, it’s still, as long as you’re pretty high up the neck, it still plays a pretty pleasant sound. And uh, it’s a lot of fun. One of my fishing lines broke but otherwise it’s a pretty nigh indestructible ship instrument, which is very handy. It’s kind of like, could double as some sort of Maori club, I suppose, in dire need.
Just in case.

But yeah, it’s uh, it’s really neat and it’s definitely different from a normal uke in that if you play it tight up against you, the sound is [plays] pretty muffled as opposed to if you play it little farther out [plays]. You get that full resonance… I think it’s assembled actually by inlaying this piece of wood. I think that this is cut out and then it’s hollowed out from the front up to this back point here. And then that piece of wood is probably laid in, and uh, glued in, and then the whole piece is varnished so it’s one continuous surface.

Nice. So a lot of the songs, I imagine, had connections to the sea.

Yeah. I know a number of sea chanteys. I don’t know how to accompany those with a stringed instrument, necessarily cause almost all of the ones I learned are sung a cappella. But, yeah, it’s uh, definitely, it sort of seems to evoke this feeling of the islands, just hearing this. It sounds different than a normal ukulele. And it’s, uh, yeah, it reminds me of being down in the South Pacific, which is why I really like it.

How is it different from Hawaii, the Hawaiian ukulele type of sound, the environment, and the aura that it creates compared to this in Tahiti.

Hawaiian ukulele is… it’s a deeper, richer sound. And uh… This is a very [plays], it’s a very high instrument. And uh… I think the Hawaiian ukulele songs that I have heard tend to be a little bit more… slower and sort of listing. And down in French Polynesia, they really, they tend to be really fast. From what I heard. And I also listened to a Maori man in New Zealand, in Roto, Rotorua who knew how to play these. I’m not sure if they also play them in New Zealand
but I think within small islands of the South Pacific this sort of an instrument is common but prior to going there I had never seen any. It certainly draws glances.

**But notice, uh, the dancing in Tahiti tends to be I think also faster, isn’t it? Is it?**

Yeah.

**The hip-shaking…**

Yeah, and in some ways a little more aggressive.

**Yeah.**

Yeah, there’s sort of a slow… I don’t know, it’s like inspired by, it seems like just slow, sort of rolling waves and for some reason, island music of the South Pacific, and I’m by no means an expert on, it seems to have a faster cadence.

**Any connections to work, as far as working on a vessel?**

With this? It’s decidedly not work. I think it inspires a break. But it’s really nice. It’s a fun thing to bring people happiness through music and it seems to definitely do that so I like having it around. And it’s definitely has sort of proven its value on board as a ship instrument because it’s almost solid so you can really use it. One of the deckhands on board was telling me. I left this on the Seaward traveling up from Mexico and they got some, into some pretty rough weather with big swells heading up, the so-called Baha Bash, back North against the current. And, and at one point on the journey, everything in the fo’c’le came flying across the room including this, and when I got back to the ship and back to the instrument in April, it didn’t seem to be really
worse for wear. There are a couple dings here and there but an instrument that can fly across a compartment of a ship underway and survive that unwanted journey is definitely a good thing to have around.

**It’s a keeper.**

Yeah, for sure.

**Thank you.**

Yeah.

**Final Thoughts**

I have long been fascinated by the history of commercial whaling and the global extent of its cultural, economic, and environmental impacts. In particular, I am interested in the dissemination of musics throughout the North as a result of whaling activities. The thought of the *Charles M. Morgan* having navigated the same cultural and natural landscapes that I experienced firsthand and have long studied is inspiring. Spending time on the whale ship provided me the unique opportunity to imagine what musical life was like aboard such vessels of the 19th and early 20th centuries. It also afforded me a deeper understanding of early musical processes of globalization and of how music and accompanying dance helped to promote and impede cultural sharing. Whaling played a critical role in the dissemination of songs and instruments throughout the world. The multicultural crews and close quarters aboard ships and the desire to promote trade on land created optimal conditions for musical exchange.
To re-imagine life aboard the Charles M. Morgan was an extraordinary experience for me. During the few hours in which the wooden whale ship was able to sail without the assistance of a tugboat, I became more sharply aware of sounds in a natural surrounding. In this setting, I was able to value more fully the important role sea chanteys played in accompanying ship tasks. Recognition of this quietude, which eventually lost out to the heavy din of mechanical power that day, reflected the larger historical impact of industry on whaling ships and deepened my appreciation for live music. As the interviews reveal, contemporary interest in preserving and reviving the traditional function of chantey singing and other forms of music-making on the decks of sailing vessels is evident. Such efforts will help to raise public awareness of a relatively little understood whaling phenomenon and, in turn, revitalize a one-time indispensable musical practice. This final product summarizes my account of the trip and the historical importance of music and music-related activities aboard whaling ships.

**Works Cited**


**List of Figures**

Figure 1: Photographer’s number 86.ASL-P27-010, Alaska State Library Historical Collections.

Figure 2: Still of a windlass courtesy of the *Charles W. Morgan* Stowaway’s video, “Windlass Chantey Santy Anno,” accessed on Mystic Seaport’s youtube channel (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-KOurhm7TPQ).

**List of Paul Krejci’s videos aboard the *Charles W. Morgan* (June 15, 2014)**

Video 1: Chanteying and Accordion Playing (featuring Joanie DiMartino and Paul Krejci)

Video 2: Interview with Tim Reilly

Video 3: Interview with Aaron Gralnik

Video 4: Interview with Matthew Ecklund

**List of Video Links**


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1 The *Charles W. Morgan* made several voyages into the Okhotsk Sea during the 1850s and 1860s: Voyage #4 (1853-1856), Voyage #5 (1856-1859), Voyage #6 (1859-1863), Voyage #7 (1863-1867) and according to written records skirted the Western Arctic waters at least once during the summer of 1861. With its long career as a whaler, it returned numerous times to the
Okhotsk Sea towards the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries: Voyage #15 (1888-1889), Voyage #19 (1892-1893), Voyage #20 (1893-1895), possibly Voyage #21 (1895-1896), Voyage #22 (1896-1897), Voyage #23 (1897-1898), possibly Voyage #24 (1898-1899), possibly Voyage #25 (1899-1900), Voyage #26 (1900-1901), Voyage #27 (1901-1902), Voyage #28 (1902-1903), and Voyage #29 (1903-1904). The ship’s presence in the Western Arctic and neighboring regions was determined from a careful reading of the following sources: Sherman 1986, Lund 2001, Stackpole 1967, and Leavitt 1973.

2 Throughout the second half of the 19th and early 20th centuries, cosmopolitan whaling crews continued to work in the Western Arctic. In 1869-1871, the Australian barque Japan carried British, American, Norwegian, Swedish, French Canadian, Cape Verde Islander, Kanaka (Pacific Islander), Maori, and Australian aborigine whalers on board (Wilkinson 1906: 5). The reporter Herbert Aldrich who sailed with the Arctic whaling fleet in 1887 commented on the diversity of the crew especially in the forecastle: “Was there ever a better place to study character than in the forecastle? Portuguese, Scandinavians, Germans, Spaniards, Englishmen, Irishmen, Americans; almost every nationality can be found there” (Aldrich 1889: 17-18). Among the 25 men or more men sailing on the bark Alexander in 1890, were at least ten European Americans, four Cape Verde Islanders, three Kanakas (Pacific Islanders), two Swedes, one creole from Barbados, a German, a Norwegian, and an Irishman (Burns 1913: 24-32, 70-74).

3 Chanteys are work songs sung traditionally on whaling ships during the 19th and 20th centuries. The word has several spellings including “chanty,” “shantey,” and “shanty.” Unless quoting from source material, “chantey” will be the spelling used throughout this paper.

4 A social exchange between the crews of whaling ships.

5 For another reference to whaling-influenced transnational music, see George Kennan’s 1865 account of an assignment to the Siberian sector of the Western Telegraph Union Expedition where he heard one of his boatmen, a Kamchadal (native from Kamchatka) sing Stephen Foster’s “Oh Susanna,” a song that he had learned from American whalers at Petropavlovsk two years earlier (114-115).

6 In 1850-1851, the brig Swallow of Hong Kong wintered at Saint Lawrence Bay in southeastern Siberia, marking the first reported overwintering of a trading vessel in the Western Arctic. Beginning in the summer of 1851, at least half a dozen trading ships from ports such as Australia, San Francisco, Honolulu, and Hong Kong operated in the region each season (Bockstoce 1995: 182, 184). Very little is known about their trading activities and there is no evidence that musical-related trade items were exchanged. In 1859, the two whalers Cleone and Wailua entered Provideniya Bay (Plover Bay) on the Chukotka Peninsula. The results were disastrous – seventeen crewmembers died of scurvy and the amount of procured whale oil was miniscule. Despite the losses, whalers continued to winter over (Bockstoce 1995: 186-187).

7 Unfortunately, Wilkinson used the terms Esquimaux (singular Esquimau) and Tchuktches (singular Tchukteche) interchangeably in his writings. It is, therefore, difficult to determine with any degree of certainty which ethnic group housed the shipwrecked crew. Wilkinson seemed to be unaware of any differences between the two peoples but he did draw a comparison between the inhabitants on the Asian side of the Bering Strait and Eskimos living on the American side (155-158, 176-186). Esquimaux is by far the most common appellation featured in the account; occasional references to Siberian Esquimau are also included. The proximity of the shipwreck and the description of the local people lead me to conclude that the whalers lived among the Siberian Yupik people of Uelen. Wilkinson made note of close contact between these people
and the more than likely maritime Chukchi of Plover Bay and Saint Lawrence Bay vicinity (144, 148, 216).

Later in his account, Wilkinson met a native man about forty years old named Enock, who spoke fluent English and excelled as a sailor. Probably a Siberian Yupik from Chaplino (Ungazik), Enock had acquired a strong command of the language and a great amount of knowledge about ships and the world in general by working as a harpooner on board various whalers and by traveling to other countries, twice visiting San Francisco. As compensation for his whaling services, he accumulated many items including “firearms, gunpowder, bullets, small shot, knives, tomahawks, lines, fishing hooks, needles etc” (273).

During the early summer of 1886, the whaler Charles Brower met a Siberian Yupik man from Indian Point who was so fond of singing “Shoo Fly” that he earned the song title as a nickname. The man had shipped aboard whalers for some time and had learned the song from a boatsteerer (75).

John Masefield (1878-1967) was an acclaimed English poet who wrote numerous poems about the sea. The one recited by Tim Reilly is called “A Valediction” originally published in his first set of poetry Salt-Water Ballads (1902).

The Brig Unicorn is best known as the ship that appeared prominently in the Pirates of the Caribbean movie franchise starring Johnny Depp and in the 1970’s TV series Roots. Built in 1948, the two-masted, square-rigged tall ship sank on May 24, 2014 off the coast of St. Lucia only weeks before the Charles W. Morgan’s highly anticipated return to the sea.